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ABSTRACT

The President of the United States uses the occasion of National School Modernization Day to offer brief remarks on the American economy and his administration's plans for improving educational facilities for the nation's children. He mentions the administration's first ever initiative at the national level to build, repair, or modernize 5,000 schools and how it can be financed; a funding initiative to help school districts hire another 100,000 teachers to lower class size; and a proposal to provide scholarships to 35,000 young people. The President also discusses the use of the Internet to link schools and the need for modernization funding so U.S. school buildings can handle the new technology. (GR)

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THE WHITE HOUSE

Office of the Press Secretary

For Immediate Release September 8, 1998

REMARKS BY THE PRESIDENT ON NATIONAL SCHOOL MODERNIZATION DAY

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Pine Crest Elementary
Silver Spring, Maryland

2:45 P.M. EDT

THE PRESIDENT: Thank you very much. I want to thank Carla for her introduction and her devotion to teaching. And I thought she did quite a good job of introducing her student. He's now sort of her boss, I guess, indirectly. (Laughter.) And, young man, you did a terrific job. You look great and you stood up twice, and I think you ought to run for office some day. (Laughter.) You really did a good job. I was very proud of you, I thought you were great.

I'd like to thank the State Superintendent Nancy Grasmick, and Superintendent Vance, and the other officials of this school district. And, Board Chair Nancy King, thank you for being with me again. She said if I came to this school district one more time I would be charged my appropriate tax assessment -- (laughter) -- to help alleviate the overcrowding problem I came to talk about today.

I'd like to thank the members of the Maryland Legislature who are here -- Senator Rubin and others -- and County Council Chair Leggett and the other local officials who are here. I'd like to also thank the representatives of the education associations that are with us, including the NEA and the AFT. And I'd like to say a special word of appreciation to our wonderful Secretary of Education, Dick Riley; to Congressman Wynn, who has been a heroic champion of education; and to my good friend, Kathleen Kennedy Townsend, for everything she has done -- especially for making Maryland the first state in the country to require community service as a condition of public education. It is a very important thing. And I hope state after state, community after community will emulate it.

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We are about to have our 100,000th young person in the AmeriCorps national service program. Creating an ethic of community service I think is one of the most important things we can do as America grows ever more diverse and still has a series of common challenges, common problems and common opportunities. And no one in America has done more to promote it than Kathleen Kennedy Townsend. I thank her for that. (Applause.)

I also want to tell you that Congressman Wynn committed the truth up here when he said that the first time we talked, he was hitting on me for more federal funds for education. And I told him if we could just complete the recovery of the economy, balance the budget, we'd have some money, and that I, for one, would be in favor of investing that money disproportionately in the education of our children and the future of our country. And together we're trying to achieve that.

I think you should know today that this event in which you are participating is one of 84 going on today

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in communities in 37 states. This is National School Modernization Day for us. The First Lady, the Vice President, governors, about 40 members of Congress, and the Cabinet -- not just Secretary Riley, but a lot of our other Cabinet members -- are out all across the country at gatherings like this. We are here to say that there is no more important long-term objective for America than world-class education for all our children, and that the children deserve schools that are as modern as the world in which they will live.

All of you know this is a time of great change and transition, and meeting the challenges of this time is daunting work. You have to follow any week, any month, the headlines about what is going on in the world and here at home, with the economy, in international political events, and you can imagine that, even on its worst day, this is a very interesting job the American people have given me. But it is daunting work dealing with the complex and dynamic world we're living in.

I have just seen it in Northern Ireland, where I visited with families, including those who were victims of the horrible bombing in Ormagh, who are determined to abandon the hatreds of the past and claim a different future for the children of Ireland. I have seen it in Russia, where people are working to lift their country out of economic crisis, even as they stay on a road to democracy and open economy.

And as Kathleen said, I had a good talk this morning with Senator Mikulski about Russia, and the Secretary of the Treasury is now, as we're here, in the Senate meeting with our Senate caucus to talk about the situation in Russia and generally what's going on in the global economy and how we can continue to push it forward.

At this moment I think all of us would admit that America, always a blessed nation, has particular blessings. We have the strongest economy in a generation. We have a dropping crime rate. We have the lowest welfare rolls in 29 years. We have the highest home ownership in history. Our country has had a remarkable run of economic and social progress, and we have been able to promote peace and security and freedom and human rights around the world.

But people with this many blessings also have significant responsibilities. We have significant responsibilities around the world not to continue to be, in the words of our Federal Reserve Chairman, Alan Greenspan, the other day, an island of prosperity in a sea of difficulty in the rest of the world. We owe it to the world to exercise our responsibilities to try to advance the cause of prosperity and peace. And it's also in our interest, since our destiny is so inextricably bound up with the rest of the world.

And we have unique responsibilities here at home. I've talked about this a lot, but I would like to reemphasize it. Sometimes when things are going really, really well for people, they get a little self-indulgent, easily distracted, and basically just want to kick back and relax. It's a natural tendency for individuals. You go through a tough time, and you work and you work and work, and things get really good -- you say, thank goodness, things are not so bad as they used to be, I'm going to relax. There are peop'' that have this whole theory that since we the lowest unemployment in nearly 30 years and the lowest inflation in over 30 years, and the economy is as strong as it's been, we're about to have the first balanced budget and surplus in 29 years, we can all just sort of pat ourselves on the back.

I believe that would be a serious error -- a serious error -- because I think, again, at times when you have many blessings, you're responsibilities are greater. And our responsibility is to say, what should we do? What should we do with the money that the American people have produced through their hard work and industry and through bringing this deficit down? What should we do with our prosperity? What should we do with our confidence?

I think there is no more important thing to do than to get in our minds what the big, long-term challenges

facing this country are and to say, we'll never have a better chance to make a big down payment on meeting the huge challenges of the country than we do right now -- because we're in good shape, because we don't have to worry about where our next dollar is coming from, because most Americans don't have to worry about where their next meal is coming from, because we have confidence that we're doing well. Now is the time -- if we can't do that now, if we can't look at the big challenges facing the country now, when can we ever do it?

Therefore, I think we ought to be asking ourselves, what do we have to do to keep this economic recovery going? What do we have to do to meet our responsibilities in the world? What do we have to do to save the Social Security and Medicare systems and make them work for the baby boomers when they retire without bankrupting our kids? One thing we ought not to do is go out and spend this surplus 60 days before an election on a tax cut when we haven't even manifested the surplus and won't have it until October 1st. We waited 30 years for a surplus; we ought to at least look at the ink turn from red to black for a year before we start throwing it away. (Applause.)

I've been waiting -- I've been counting the days until October 1st so I can say, whew, we actually have the surplus. And now nobody even wants us to get there before they start spending it again. And more importantly, spending it on a tax cut estimates what the surplus will be in years ahead. Now, we've been very good on estimating. I've been on the right side of that. Every year I've been President I've said, well, here's what I think the deficit is going to be, and it's always been lower. And we've always been fortunate because we haven't made a lot of false claims here. But we need to save the Social Security system before we start giving away the surplus that, in fact, has not even materialized yet. That's a big challenge.

The second thing we need to do is prove that we can not just preserve, but improve the environment as we grow the economy. We know we can do that, but you'd be amazed how many people don't believe we can do that still. You'd be utterly amazed -- not just in America, but all around the world -- who still believe there's this sort of iron law of environmental degradation and economic growth, and that no scientific discovery, no technological advance, nothing will ever enable us to do it. I think it's a big challenge we need to face.

We've got over 160 million Americans in managed care plans. I think it's a big challenge to protect the rights of people in managed care so you can control costs as much as possible without sacrificing quality, or peace of mind for families. I think people ought to be able to go to an emergency room when they need to, or see a specialist when they need to, and shouldn't have the doctor taken away in the middle of treatment. I think these are big issues, not little issues -- big things for the country.

But there is no bigger issue -- and there are lots of others -- the Senate is going to get another chance to do the right thing on campaign finance reform. I wish they would. I'd like to see all my successors be able to spend less time raising money and more time helping you raise your kids. I hope that can happen. (Applause.) But let's not kid ourselves. Nothing we do will have a greater effect on the future of this country than guaranteeing every child, without regard to race or station in life or region in this country, a world-class education. Nothing. (Applause.)

But first things first. You are all -- I mean, this is sort of what's called preaching to the saved because you all agree with all this on education. (Laughter.) But even before the education issue, you must first decide what should our attitude be about our present moment of good fortune. I think our attitude should be it is not just a time to enjoy it, to indulge ourselves, to be diverted, it is a time to recognize the very serious questions before us and realize the unique opportunity we have to fulfill our responsibility to the future. And it always begins with our children.

As Secretary Riley said many times this month, we had a record number of school children start school --

52.7 million -- half a million more than last year, more than at the height of the baby boom, more than at any time. And all the indications are that this will continue, this so-called baby boom echo, will continue to reverberate for years and years to come.

Now, there are a lot of things that we should be doing in education. I came to emphasize one today, but I think it's worth repeating that we have advocated high standards, high expectations, high levels of accountability, and high levels of support to achieve those objectives. We've got a program to expand charter schools; to end social promotion, but to provide after-school and summer school programs to people who need it; to reward our most committed teachers; to train more and certify more master teachers; to do more to help our children master the basics, and to pass voluntary national tests for 4th grade reading and 8th grade math. We've called for more efforts to make our schools safe and disciplined and drug free. But it's important to point out that with the biggest group of school children in history enrolled, one of the biggest problems is the adequacy and the quality of the physical space itself, and its capacity to hook into the information revolution.

The Vice President and I, for nearly four years now, have been working to hook all of our classrooms and libraries up to the Internet by the year 2000. There are lot of these classrooms that aren't hookable. (Laughter.) And basically we have two different kinds of problems. First of all, too many schools are overcrowded: classes in hallways, gyms, portables on campuses -- like here, outside. (Laughter.)

I was in a little town in Florida where one school had, as I remember, 12 different trailers out there behind it, maybe more. Then not very long after that I went to Philadelphia, where the average school building is 65 years old. And they're magnificent buildings. You couldn't afford to build buildings like that today. But they haven't been maintained.

And I always ask people, what kind of signal do you send to an inner-city child whose one chance to make it in life is a decent education if every day the child has to walk up the stairs and go into a school where the windows are broken, the paint is peeling, there's graffiti on the walls, maybe a whole floor is shut down because it is simply physically incapable of being occupied? And then the child will turn on the television and hear every politician like me saying, children are the most important things to our future, education is the most important issue. The actions that the child sees walking up the steps to school every day are louder than all the words to the contrary of the politicians. This is a big issue. (Applause.)

So what we have done within the balanced budget -- I want to emphasize this. It's true. Congressman Wynn will tell you I've disappointed some of my friends because I don't think we can vary from what got us to the dance of prosperity. And what got us to the dance of prosperity is being ruthless about balancing this budget, keeping the interest rates down, getting the investment up and giving Americans a job so they can pay taxes to the local school district, so you can do the lion's share of the work.

Consistent with that and within that framework, we have proposed the first ever initiative at the national level to help communities build and repair and modernize more than 5,000 schools, so that we can meet this huge need out there. It's a school construction tax cut that is completely and fully paid for in the balanced budget. It doesn't touch a penny of the surplus and it is the right way to cut taxes. It respects discipline, it targets investments to the future where they're needed most.

And what I would like to ask all of you to do is to help Congressman Wynn reach the other members of Congress and say this ought not to be a Republican or a Democratic issue. It ought not to be an issue that pits the rapidly growing suburbs against inner-cities with old buildings that anybody would love to have if they were just properly modernized and wired. This ought to be an issue where we can all say that it's a national priority. And you can talk all you want to about education, but we don't need a crowded or a

crumbling classroom, or permanent reliance on house trailers as the symbol of America's commitment to education. Now, that's important.

I also want to point out that we have paid for, within the balanced budget, in addition to the school construction, enough funds to help school districts hire another 100,000 teachers to lower the class size, average class size, to 18 in the early grades. And I think that's important. (Applause.)

All the research shows it makes a permanent difference if early in the educational experience teachers have the chance to give personal attention to students, and they have a chance to relate to each other in a class that is small enough to embed permanently not only learning skills, but habits of relating and learning in the future. All the research shows that.

Finally, let me say, we have a proposal to provide scholarships to 35,000 young people who will agree to go out and teach in educationally underserved areas, based on the old idea of the National Health Service Corps. You know, I used to be Governor, as one of my opponents once said, of a small, rural state -- (laughter) -- and we had all these places in the country that could never get a doctor. And the National Health Service Corps came along and they gave these young people scholarships to medical schools and covered the enormous cost of going. And all they had to do was to be willing to go out either to an inner-city area or out in the rural area where they couldn't get a doctor, and serve for a few years and work off the cost of medical school.

That's what we want to do with education. We want to say, we will pay your way to school, we'll help you get an education; after a couple of years, you can do whatever you want to with your life, but we ask you in return for our investment in your education to go to an inner-city school or a rural school or a Native American school -- go someplace where they won't have a good teacher if it weren't for you. I think it is a great idea. (Applause.) It is fully funded.

Now, the last thing I want to say -- and this goes back to the school modernization -- we've got to ask Congress to pass the budget to give us the funds to hook all the classrooms and the libraries up to the Internet by the year 2000. This is a huge deal, and it is a major, major educational issue.

You may remember that last spring the First Lady and I and a large delegation of members of Congress and others went to Africa. And it was the first time a sitting American President had ever taken an extensive trip to several countries in sub-Saharan Africa. It had never happened before. We visited a school in Uganda that will soon be linked to Pine Crest by the Internet. (Applause.) We were actually there.

When you see that school, if you have the visual link through the Internet, you want to give those kids some new maps, you'll want to send them some books, you'll want to do a lot of things, but you'll also know that they are beautiful, good, highly intelligent, and immensely, immensely eager to be connected to the rest of the world and to share a common future with our children.

So this is very important. Unfortunately, nearly half of our schools don't have the wiring necessary to support basic computer systems. We're doing a great job, and it's not just the government -- private sector, local districts, everybody -- a fabulous job of getting these computers out into the classrooms. More and more, there is good educational software. But what are we going to do when the actual wiring is not there? We have to do this.

So, again, I ask Congress to pass the funds -- in the balanced budget -- for the connection for the Internet. It's a huge thing. And it has more potential to dramatically revolutionize and equalize education, if the teachers are properly trained, than anything else. And in our plan, we have funds for teacher training as

well. Otherwise, you'll wind up having the kids know more about it. (Laughter.) We can't afford to have that. (Laughter.)

So that's what I'm here to say. Number one, let's get people out of the house trailers and get them out of the falling-down buildings, and give our kids something to be proud of, and send them the right signal and have the physical facilities we need. We've got a plan to do it, with the right kind of tax cut, it's in the balanced budget.

Number two, let's fund 100,000 teachers and take average class size down to 18 in the early grades. Number three, let's fund the money necessary to enable all of our classes and all of our libraries in all of our schools to be hooked up to the Internet by the year 2000. If we do that we're going to be very, very proud of how our kids turn out in the years ahead.

Thank you and God bless you. Thank you. (Applause.)

END

3:09 P.M. EDT

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Last Updated -- September 9, 1998. (pjk)